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Adorno, Critical Theory, and Ordinary Language Philosophy

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Ever relevant, Adorno stresses that “we may not know what absolute good is or the absolute norm, we may not even know what man is or the human or humanity—but what is inhuman we know very well indeed.”¹ In the background here is the potential critique of critical theory’s lack of normative foundations. On what grounds do we even know the latter? Perhaps the best way to answer this question is to embrace the problem: take critical theory to start wherever the critical theorist finds herself. Each of us who recognizes suffering is an expert. What if that is all the justification we might need? Take critical theory to be a sort of practical enterprise where I aim to communicate my expertise about the world: the world is such that it produces *this* suffering in *this* way. This may be one way to understand Horkheimer’s suggestion that the critical theorist and her “specific object are seen as forming a dynamic unity with the op-

1 Theodor W. Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, ed. Thomas Schröder, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 175.

pressed class.”² Equally, we might cite here Marx’s claim, in his famous 1843 letter to Arnold Ruge, to see critical philosophy as the “self-clarification of the struggles and wishes of the age.” Various sites of oppression—and even cynical or brutal misuses of claims to oppression—allow us to register the full scope of suffering in the world. There are other experts than us. There are also those who would betray or make a mockery of such expertise. And still, we are each potentially an expert. As Adorno writes, we “must find the words that are alone legitimized by the state of truth in them,” these words must hit upon where “truth dwells at the historical hour.”³

I would draw here an analogy to the “ordinary language philosophy” practiced by philosophers like J. L. Austin and Stanley Cavell (which is not the sort of ordinary language philosophy criticized by Marcuse in *One Dimensional Man*). For Austin and Cavell, we are each authoritative when we speak. Our speech is also a kind of act, inviting others to see what we see. Austin goes so far as to claim that, “when we examine what we should say when, what words we should use in what situations, we are looking again not *merely* at words (or “meanings,” whatever they may be) *but also at the realities we use the words to talk about*: we are using a sharpened awareness of words to sharpen our perception of, though not as the final arbiter of, *the phenomena*.”⁴ Take the notion of practice seriously: just as an expert in, say, plumbing may initiate you into seeing the—quite real—malfunction of your pipes, so too the critical theorist may initiate you into seeing the—equally, quite real—malfunction of society. Speech in this case is a claim to community. As with plumbing, any such speech may be rejected, for reasons compelling or not. In such cases, though, “we have to conclude that on this point we are simply different; that is, we cannot here speak for one another. But no claim has been made which has been disconfirmed.”⁵ Cavell notes that it is not the case that something false has been said, rather we have learned “that there is no us (yet, maybe never) to say anything about. What is wrong with his statement is that he made it to the wrong party.”⁶

Seeing critical theory in close proximity to this sort of ordinary language philosophy is a way to inflect Adorno’s claim that “cognition needs not less

- 2 Max Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell et al. (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 215.
- 3 Theodor W. Adorno, “Theses on the Language of the Philosopher,” in *Adorno and the Need in Thinking: New Critical Essays*, eds. Donald Burke et al. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 36. Translation modified.
- 4 J. L. Austin, “A Plea for Excuses,” in *Philosophical Papers*, eds. J. O. Urmson and G. J. Warnock (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 182.
- 5 Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 20.
- 6 Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 20.

subjectivity, but more.”⁷ Even with (we might say exactly because of) the Frankfurt School skepticism about subjectivity, being a self means that I “do not know in advance how deep my agreement with myself is, how far responsibility for the language may run.”⁸ The full import of my claims may even emerge only in the context of others. Nonetheless, if I am to be a self, no matter how damaged, I must acknowledge that I am always speaking for others, and likewise them for me. In this way, the “alternative to speaking for myself representatively (for *someone* else’s consent) is not: speaking for myself privately. The alternative is having nothing to say, being voiceless.”⁹ Speech is not solely the transmission of information, nor merely the circulation of exchange (although it can be and oftentimes just is exactly this). This need not mean we can no longer speak of justification or objectivity or truth. To return to the tired image, when a plumber tells you how to see your pipes, you may come to see them as he does (if the plumber, say, initiates you into seeing them in that way by means of explanation and education). When a mathematician explains a feature of mathematics to you, you also come to see that feature in the world; when a musician teaches you a scale, you now come to hear what they hear, and so forth. Objectivity need not be divorced from, let alone incompatible with, human interpretation or human sensibility. Still, to grasp such objectivity you may need certain training. This does not impugn the objectivity at hand. Rather it is to acknowledge, as Adorno does, that “direct communicability to everyone is not a criterion of truth.”¹⁰ Think equally here of John McDowell’s analogies to color perception—just because some people divvy up the color spectrum differently (or perceive color incorrectly) does not mean that human sensibility isn’t crucial to a proper understanding of color. What if the (moral) truths claimed by critical theory are of a kind?

Critical theory is then a distinct way of viewing the world. It is a practice into which one may be initiated. We are each of us potentially a critical theorist, each one capable of bringing particular insights to bear on this practical tradition. Critical theory is thereby transformative and constantly transforming. The relation between critical theory and praxis, then, is ultimately settled by our practices. Sometimes the struggle against oppression will involve one kind of activity: we must do something to reduce this kind of *suffering*. Other times, it will involve another kind of activity: we must come to see the world properly in order to understand *this* kind of suffering. Each one of us is then

7 Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1973), 40.

8 Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 24.

9 Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 28.

10 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 41.

potentially at the center of the practice of critical theory (but not only us, since all speech is to and for someone). And that is all the objectivity and justification that we need.

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